

The Leupp Navajo Immersion Program

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Of the 20 schools in the Flagstaff Unified School District (Flagstaff, AZ), Leupp is the most unique for several reasons. First, it is the only school in the district that is located on the Navajo Indian Reservation. In addition, it boasts the highest minority population in the district (99% American Indian). Leupp is also unique in other respects. It has the highest percentage of low income students (98%), the highest poverty rate (58%), and the highest percentage of limited English proficient students (43%). For years, it was also the poorest performing school in the district academically.

So it was with mixed emotions that the faculty and staff at Leupp Public School introduced a Navajo immersion program in the fall of 1998. For some, there was jubilation because a program was being implemented that might help stem the light-speed decline of the Navajo language. Two year earlier, Leupp parents were alarmed when test scores revealed that fewer than 10% of their children could speak the Navajo language. This was shocking news to a community where just a generation ago Navajo was the dominant language among young and old alike. When Leupp parents were surveyed to determine if they wanted the school to develop a bilingual program, 95% responded in the affirmative.

However, not all faculty and staff shared this enthusiasm. Some argued that Leupp students would fall even further behind in their English language and academic skills if they were taught in Navajo for half of the day. Opponents also pointed out that the program would not

be grounded on the same principles as traditional bilingual programs. That is, teachers would not be building upon the students' foundation knowledge in Navajo and transferring skills to English because English was their dominant language.

The counter to these arguments was simple and perhaps naïve: "We've tried English-only with the Navajo for 130 years, and the results have been disastrous. The parents want this program. The community wants it. The Navajo Tribe wants it. Let's give it a try. We can't do any worse, and we may do a lot better."

With a proverbial leap of faith, the district applied for and received a five-year Title VII comprehensive school-wide grant to develop a Navajo Immersion (NI) program. Beginning in 1998, kindergarten students were taught in the Navajo language for 80% of the day. The NI curriculum was centered around the Navajo concept of *hozho*, or "peace, beauty, and harmony." Objectives were taught through four global

themes, each representing one of the four Sacred Mountains of the Navajo. While the curriculum was grounded in Arizona state standards, concepts were initially presented in the Navajo language from a Navajo cultural perspective (see Fillerup, 2000).

In the fall of 1999, the NI program was expanded to include first grade, with second grade added in the fall of 2000 and third grade added in 2001. Additional grades will continue to be added until the immersion program permeates the entire school, grades K-8.

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Last spring (2001), the original cohort class took the Stanford 9 test for the first time, as second graders. Twenty-three students were administered the test, including 17 LEP and six non-LEP students. Although the sample size was small, the results were more than encouraging.

NIP Students v. District Students: Non-LEP & LEP

The second grade Non-LEP students in the NI program averaged 72.0 NCEs in Reading, 71.0 NCEs in Math, and 52.0 NCEs in Language. By comparison, Non-LEP students district-wide averaged 56.4, 58.9, and 51.1 NCEs in Reading, Math, and Language, respectively. Overall, Non-LEP students in the NI program outperformed the average Non-LEP student in the district by 15.6 NCEs in Reading, 12.1 NCEs in Math, and .9 NCEs in Language. Even more impressive, LEP second graders in the NI program averaged 56.8 NCEs in Reading, 66.7 NCEs in Math, and 44.8 NCEs in Language. In other words, LEP students in the NI program outperformed the average Non-LEP student in the district by .4 NCEs in Reading and 7.8 NCEs in Math, while scoring within 6.3 NCEs in Language.

NIP Students v. "Mostly English" Students at Leupp: Non-LEP & LEP

Second grade students in the NI cohort also outperformed the previous year's (1999-00) "mostly English" second graders at Leupp in all three subtests. Non-LEP second graders who had received almost all of their instruction in English averaged 54.0 NCEs in Reading, 62.0 NCEs in Math, and 44.0 NCEs in Language, while LEP students in the mostly-English program averaged 23.3, 33.8, and 15.4 NCEs in Reading, Math, and Language. Non-LEP students in the NI program outgained their mostly-English Non-LEP predecessors by 18, 9, and 8 NCEs, and LEP students in the NI program outgained the mostly-English LEP second graders by a staggering 33.1, 32.9, and 29.4 NCEs in Reading, Math, and Language, respectively.

So What Does This Mean

It should be noted that, along with the NI program, several other initiatives were introduced to improve student achievement at Leupp. These included: sheltered English instruction at all grades, Take-Home Technology, family literacy, and school-wide literacy programs, such as Sustained Silent Reading, Read Across the Rez, and Books in the Home. Another critical component to Leupp's success has been the superior leadership of principal Louise Scott, a strong advocate for Navajo language revitalization, and the relentless support of district superintendent Larry Bramblett. Finally, collaborative efforts have enabled the Leupp staff and community to incorporate Navajo culture throughout the school. Specifically, sweat lodges were built for traditional sweat ceremonies; a shade house was constructed by students as part of a thematic unit and is used for traditional school and community gatherings. In January 2002, a hogan, the traditional Navajo home, was formally dedicated on site to serve as a school cultural center and meeting-place.

While all of these efforts have contributed to Leupp's recent success, the students in the NI program demonstrated the greatest gains on a standardized test in English. While one SAT 9 test does not make or break a program, this data should help to dispel any concerns about indigenous language immersion programs having a detrimental effect on the English language development of native students, whether LEP or Non-LEP. In fact, all of our data thus far indicates that the NI program accelerates English language proficiency and academic achievement. While Reyhner and Tennant (1995) have argued persuasively as to the affective benefits of teaching in the tribal language, we also have quantitative data to support the academic and linguistic advantages of indigenous language instruction. ●

References

- Fillerup, M. (2000). Racing Against Time: A Report on the Leupp Navajo Immersion Project. In J. Reyhner, J. Martin, L. Lockard, & W.S. Gilbert (Eds.), *Learn in Beauty: Indigenous Education for a New Century*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University. Available at <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/LIB/LIB3.html>
- Reyhner, J. & Tennant, E. (1995). Maintaining and renewing Native languages. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 19, 279-304. Available at <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/Main.html>

LEGISLATION

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Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB Act) and were drafted subject to a negotiated rulemaking process.

These regulations become effective August 5, 2002. You may view this Federal Register document, as well as all other Department of Education

documents published in the Federal Register, in text or in Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) on the Internet at: www.ed.gov/legislation/FedRegister.

For further information on the regulations, contact Susan Wilhelm, Student Achievement and School Accountability Programs, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Ave., SW, room 3W202,

FB-6, Washington, DC 20202-6132.

The regulatory language (see Box on page 28) directly address limited English proficient students served by Title I programs. There are additional references throughout the regulations which require State Education Agencies and Local Educational Agencies to address the unique language needs of LEP students and their families. ●